A Neo-Marxist Study of the Select Retellings of Mahabharata

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Introduction:

The Retellings of *Mahabharata* fascinate the researchers to apply literary theories and experiment it from different points of view. The present study is an attempt to explore on the Retellings of *Mahabharata* by Devdutt Pattanaik, *Jaya: an Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010), Anand Neelakantan, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013), Kavita Kane, *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* (2014) and Ashutosh Nadkar, *Shakuni: Master of the Game* (2019) by applying Neo-Marxian concepts 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and 'Role of Intellectuals' by Antonio Gramsci.

The researcher has taken both male and female characters from the chosen primary texts to discuss about the cultural hegemony prevailed during the ancient time and has also highlighted on the functional solution enumerated by Gramsci with the aid of the characters. The area of research is relevant in this present scenario to highlight the cultural hegemony which still exists among the Indians in different forms. The work is significant as it can relate the issues depicted by the authors of the selected retellings of *Mahabharata* with our current society.

Aim:

The aim of the study is to unravel the culture based domination established in the select Retellings of *Mahabharata* in the light of Antonio Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and 'Role of Intellectuals'. To substantiate 'men and women are inter-related in the case of Cultural domination in India', 'becoming an Organic Intellectual of one's own community' and 'Inter-caste marriage' can be a solution for Caste based domination.

Review of Literature/Research Gap:

In the review of literature analysed, many Researchers' concentrated more on the feminist aspects and social issues like gender and caste from the retellings of *Mahabharata*. Articles were written with the emphasis on the importance of Indian mythology. The 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' is employed in Indian cinemas, Indian media and Indian plays but not in the Retellings of *Mahabharata*. Marxist and Neo-Marxist approaches were applied to British and American Novels. So far no one has examined the Retellings of *Mahabharata* in the light of Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and Role of Intellectuals', which forms the Research Gap for the Research.

Objectives:

The objectives of the study are:

- To understand the significance of the need for retelling of myths and the relevance of it.
- To explore the Neo-Marxist modes of analysing literature
- To analyse the select retellings of *Mahabharata* in the light of Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and 'Role of Intellectuals'
- To identify the social hierarchy established through these retellings.
- To analyse how retellings of myth can contribute to make or break the social hierarchy

The primary texts selected for the study are:

- *Jaya: an Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* by Devdutt Pattanaik (2010)

- *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* by Anand Neelakantan (2013)
- *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* by Kavita Kane (2014)
- *Shakuni: Master of the Game* by Ashutosh Nadkar (2019)

The study explores the retellings of *Mahabharata* in the light of Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and 'Role of Intellectuals'. The study elucidates on the purpose of retelling of *Mahabharata* by critically analysing the selected texts and elaborates on the cultural aspects from them. The study also draws attention to the culture based dominations, capitalist ideologies and gives a practical solution for domination in accordance with Gramsci's theories.

Methodology:

The selected primary texts are critically analysed to get an insight about the need for retelling *Mahabharata*. Antonio Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and 'Role of Intellectuals' act as the theoretical base to explore the culture based domination in the selected primary texts. The documentations and citations in the thesis are in accordance with the eighth edition of **MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper.**

Limitations:

- The study is confined to four contemporary Retellings of *Mahabharata*.
- Among many Neo-Marxist critics the study is limited to Antonio Gramsci.
- Limited to certain concepts of Gramsci's theory.
- Concentrated on the select characteristics of Retelling an Epic.
- Explored on the selected characters and events from the chosen primary text.

Thesis Structure:

Chapter 1- Introduction: This chapter traces the origin and history of myth, mythology, Indian culture, Epic Tradition, *Mahabharata* and gives an overview of the Indian caste system. It throws light on the purpose of retelling and the various versions of *Mahabharata* with the primary focus on the retellings of *Mahabharata*. Introduction provides Literature survey, research gap, significance of the study and framework of the study.

Myth is a dynamic and man-made belief to maintain the culture of a society. It is revisited and altered according to the necessity of people and acts as a guiding source for people. Religion is maintained with the help of mythology. Mythology is created in order to carry out religion and culture to consecutive generations. In Indian culture 'caste system' is one of the aspects of the culture, based on the Varna system. As days go by, it became a deciding factor in the entire field including education and marriage. Domination of the upper caste people over the lower caste people was based on caste system. Because of subjugation, humiliation and poverty, people of lower caste started to mobilise themselves from one caste to another caste in order to gain freedom from the subjugation and domination.

A society's culture is exposed through their art and literature. Culture gives a pattern of living for a group of people. *Mahabharata* is the longest narrative with many characters. There are so many regional versions, abridged versions and different versions with different perspective by various authors. The contemporary Indian writers used it as a political allegory and also to deal with the various social issues prevailing. This in turn paves way to analyse the retellings of *Mahabharata* from different dimensions.

Chapter 2: Marxism, Neo-Marxism and Antonio Gramsci- an overview: The second chapter gives an overview of Marxism and Marxist literary criticism, the Neo-Marxist critics, difference between Marxism and Neo-Marxism, and the emergence of Neo-Marxism. Marxism is the term used to analyse socio economic and political changes by criticising the development of capitalism in a country. This was started with the political ideology by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in Germany and later many other critics from different countries started to interpret capitalism in their country using Marx's theory as a base. Marxism aims to create an egalitarian society without any private ownership.

Neo Marxism adopted the ideologies from Marxism and analysed it with other critical and culture theories. One major difference between Marxism and Neo Marxism is; Neo Marxism focuses on the role of culture, religion and felt that as the determining factors which influences the society, but Marxism concentrates completely on the economic base and superstructure. Most prominent critics of Neo-Marxism are Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Frederick Jameson and post-Marxist thinker Stuart Hall; they are influenced by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.

Antonio Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and the 'Role of Intellectuals' state that aristocrats dominate the proletariat using Culture and by propagating their ideas. The proletariats are made to believe that they are marching towards light. Gramsci says that the 'role of intellectuals' plays a major role in domination, as the intellectuals propagate the idea which is favouring the capitalist in a way that people accept it without any rejection.

Thus, Gramsci opines that in order to overcome the capitalist rule one must become an Organic Intellectual belonging to their community and become a guiding source by expressing

their ideologies regarding politics by observing the capitalist society. He states that the main strength of the capitalist lies on their intellectual ability in compromising their ideas to the people, likewise many intellectuals should rise from the working class people to compromise their ideologies to the capitalist.

Chapter 3- Select Retellings of Mahabharata a critical analysis: This chapter analyses the purposes of rewriting the ancient Epic the *Mahabharata* and provides reason for the choice of primary texts. Rewriting the ancient epic has undergone various changes from the traditional way of writing. The modern writers have used various perspectives to give a new angle to the ancient Epic. The Epics are being rewritten from feminist perspective, antagonist perspective, and minor, voiceless character's perspective, in order to bring out their role and impact of their presence from the ancient text. At times the author speaks through the characters deliberately to address the social issues. Subversion of the ancient characters is one of key the aspects of rewriting an epic.

Devdutt Pattanaik is the author of *Jaya: an Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata* (2010). He has written an abridged version to make the modern readers know about Indian mythology. It can be considered as a condensed version of *Mahabharata* since it is not written from any particular character's perspective. The characterizations are mainly based on the people following the path of *Dharma* and the others following the path of *Adharma*. He has included tales and illustrations in his book.

Anand Neelakantan, author of *Ajay: Roll of the Dice* (2013) has given the antagonist Duryodhana's perspective and the story revolves around Duryodhana. This novel justifies Duryodhana's actions by claiming that his parents and teacher are responsible for his inhuman

nature and also portrays him as a casteless person in a way influencing the modern readers to become one like Duryodhana. The characters are revealed from Duryodhana's view and his conception regarding the characters. The distinctive aspect of this novel is that the author has addressed the caste issue, untouchability by highlighting various events and the characters from *Mahabharata*.

Kavita Kane's, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2014) is from a novel character Uruvi's perspective. The main purpose of narrating it from Uruvi's perspective is to make the readers know about Karna's personal life and also about a courageous woman (Uruvi) and her protest against all the rules and regulations in order to live the life she wished. It is a feminist perspective novel and the author has depicted Uruvi as a feminist and she does not compromise with her husband's lies and also she is a strong woman to overcome all the odds. As a contrast Karna's first wife Vrushali is shown as the most devoted wife and she does not even question any actions of her husband Karna.

Ashutosh Nadkar, author of *Shakuni: Master of the Game* (2019) has narrated from Shakuni's point of view and justifies his action and portrays Shakuni as a tragic hero by highlighting his presence in the epic. All the characters are described from Shakuni's point of view and it is an open-ended novel. The author has included his assumption regarding the Pandavas' birth and also depicted the character Vidura as villain in his novel. The authors have shown variation in the events when the perspective changes. There are variations found in the characterisation, language used, opening and closure of the novels and also in titling the chapters. Thus, the modern retellings are written according to the author's desire and their perception of the characters and the events in the Epic *Mahabharata*.

Chapter 4 -To Untie or to Unite Cultural Hegemony: This chapter traces the cultural aspects of the primary text to unravel the domination that happened in the name of culture. It depicts the connection between women and politics in the novel. It also highlights how a powerful kingdom dominates over a powerless kingdom by manipulating and ruling them using their power. It concentrates on patriarchy, which acts as a main reason for the gender and caste-based dominations by analysing the pairs of the characters: King Dushyanta and Shakuntala, King Yayati, Devayani and Sharmistha, King Shantanu and Satyavati, and Uruvi and Karna. Among the female characters only Uruvi stood against *Pratiloma* rules of marriage and married a man belonging to a lower caste.

This chapter also focuses on the powerful people's domination over the vassal countries by threatening them with their arm power. Bhishma Abducts Ambika, Ambalika and Amba to marry them off to his step-brother Vichitravirya and threaten Gandhara's King to offer Gandhari in marriage with his blind grandson Dhirthirashtra. In this chapter the practice of *Niyoga* and its impact was emphasised through the characters Ambika and Ambalika, Kunti and Madri.

The second part of this chapter discusses the role of caste in education, how education is denied to the lower caste Ekalavya and Karna. Dronacharya refuses to teach Ekalavya and Karna because they belong to a lower caste and Kripacharya asks for a hefty amount from Karna to teach him war craft. This part highlights the upper caste teacher's attitude towards the eligible individuals and how they ruin an individual's life and their future. The upper caste members act in such a way that the lower caste does not emerge out to learn and become equal to them. They make sure that *Brahmin*s and *Kshatriya*s remain intelligent people of their country. They restrict by drawing rules from *Dharma Shastra* and not allowing the lower caste people to learn *Vedas*.

It also elaborates on the various kinds of humiliation endured by Karna and portrays Drona being a partial teacher.

Women's oppression also becomes one of the important components when it comes to the cultural domination in India. As they are interrelated, men dominate women and they are tied with their political policies. Gramsci points out that the capitalists manipulated the people by using culture as a tool. This is analysed in this chapter.

Chapter 5-Capitalist Ideologies and Traditional and Organic Intellectuals: This chapter expounds on the ideologies of ruling class people towards the lower class people. It also analyses Balarama and Kripacharya as a 'Traditional Intellectual'. Bhishma as an Organic Intellectual of *Kshatriya* community, *Naga*'s leader Takshaka as an Organic Intellectual of *Naga* community and Karna, as an Organic Intellectual of *Shudra* community.

The rise and decline of the caste system and the ruling class ideology over their country is analysed through the conversations of Bhishma and Duryodhana; their imagination over the country's prosperity, inattentiveness to address the poverty prevailing in the country is discussed. This is the stark reality even today, the privileges of being a ruling caste is explained through the character Vidura. He enjoys the privilege of learning *Vedas* and other skills, even though he is half-*Brahmin* and half-lower caste. The notions of the ruling caste towards the two extremes are: one exhibited through Parashurama being the ruler of *Brahmin* Community who wishes to become the power centre and on the other *Naga's* leader Takshaka who also tries to become the power centre. Both the leaders desire to become the power centre, because they want to afflict the lower caste people.

The ruling caste has a prejudice that the lower caste does not possess enough knowledge to differentiate and think between the orders given by their leader. The lower caste people obey orders verbatim without questioning their leaders. The ruling caste people have a notion that only they can rule their country effectively and no other caste people are strong, knowledgeable and wealthy enough to rule the country.

Portraying Duryodhana as a casteless person, the author Anand Neelakandan tries to highlight on the decline of caste based ideologies in the mind of modern readers, and also influence them to become one like Duryodhana and disregard the caste based ideology and practices, and treat human as human. This chapter also explores the idea that; status depends on caste and power depends on class. Poverty has not only been faced by the lower caste members but also by the *Brahmin*s which is evident through Ashwathama. The domination of *Kshatriya* is discussed when Drupada humiliates Drona and also when the Pandavas burnt down *Khandavprastha* by asking all the *Naga* people to migrate from the forest to periphery.

Balarama and Kripacharya are discussed as the traditional intellectuals as they do not adhere strictly to the rules and judge people according to their caste. They treat everyone equally with respect. Both of them treat Karna as a great warrior and give him respect for the merit he possess. Bhishma as an organic intellectual of the *Kshatriya* community is discussed through his actions and decisions that are completely favouring only his kingdom and family. *Naga*'s leader Takshaka as an organic intellectual and his failure for having revolutionary ideas in his mind is examined. Karna as an organic intellectual of the *Shudra* community strives hard to become as equal to a *Kshatriya* by proving to them he that has enough potential to be one among them.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion: The conclusion chapter sums up the whole thesis by stating that mythology has helped to discuss the cultural aspects prevailed in the country through the retellings of *Mahabharata*. A possible solution for the culture based domination, subjugation and humiliation is drawn with the help of Gramsci's 'Theory of Cultural Hegemony' and the 'Role of Intellectuals'. The inferences of the research are: one can escape from caste based domination through inter-caste marriage as Uruvi does; and by becoming an organic intellectual of their community like Karna.

Conclusion:

The retelling of *Mahabharata* is a perfect work of art to examine cultural influences and reactions to Indian customs and traditions. It is beneficial to understand the diverse attitudes of the characters about customs and traditions. Application of Gramsci's theory to the retellings of *Mahabharata*, unravels the cultural aspects and ideologies of the capitalist in the selected primary text taken for the study. Hegemony has been practiced in various sectors of India. In order to eradicate it completely one must create awareness and propagate new ideologies for the existing hegemony. The counter ideology must be proposed and propagated in such a way that it is accepted and supported by the majority of the people. This paves way for establishing the egalitarian society eradicating all subtle way of dominance over the mass.

Scope for Further Research:

The retelling of *Mahabharata* could be analyzed using theories like:

- Psychoanalytical theory:

- In the light of Carl Jung's 'Collective Unconsciousness' and Emile Durkheim's 'Collective Consciousness'
- Archetypal theory
- Reader response theory.
- Retelling of *Mahabharata* as a Post-Post Modernist text/as a text of logical reasons

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